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Course change and attrition from higher education

Each year, a number of university students in Australia leave the courses in which they have enrolled. Some change to other courses while others defer their course or leave the university altogether. What motivates students to change or leave their university course and does the decision result in a positive or negative outcome for the students involved? These are among the questions addressed in the latest study completed in the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) research program conducted by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) with the Australian Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST).

The study, *Course change and attrition from higher education*, aimed to provide a description of the incidence and nature of higher education course change and attrition, identify factors associated with course change and attrition, and examine the destinations of the attrition sub-group.

LSAY is the first large-scale national level study to track the pathways of young people from school into higher education, between courses and institutions within the higher education sector, and from higher education into other education, training or labour market activities.

The report examined the pathways of recent school leavers who entered the higher education sector in Australia, focusing on the first three years after completing their secondary schooling. The findings were based upon 6876 young Australians who were in Year 9 in 1995 and commenced higher education in 1999 or 2000. Their education, training and labour market activities were tracked until late in 2001 when they were around 20 years of age.

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The level and nature of course change and attrition

Thirteen per cent of the study's participants had changed courses within the higher education sector by age 20. Fourteen per cent had left the higher education sector without completing a qualification and had not returned. However, the majority of the study's participants (almost 75 per cent) were persisting with their initial course. Furthermore, the report emphasised that attrition is not necessarily a permanent state; some course non-completers may return to the higher education sector at a later date to complete their course or to commence another course.

Movement tended to occur within a year of initial enrolment (63 per cent of the cases of course change and 48 per cent of the cases of attrition). Most course changers moved straight into another course, and very few students changed course on more than one occasion or experienced a course change followed by attrition.

There was a large amount of movement between broad fields of education among the course changers. Sixty-nine per cent of this group moved into a new broad field of education when they commenced their second course. Nearly one-half of the course changers moved to another higher education institution when they commenced their second course.

Who changes their course or leaves the higher education sector?

A number of characteristics of course changers were identified. Groups that displayed relatively high levels of course change included students whose parents had a university degree or diploma, students from independent schools, students with moderately high ENTER scores, students whose initial course was not their first preference, students who commenced higher education immediately after completing Year 12, full-time students, students in fields of education such as the natural and physical sciences, medicine/dentistry/veterinary science/law, society and culture, and engineering and related technologies, and students who spent over 15 hours per week in paid work.

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A somewhat different set of characteristics were associated with attrition from the higher education sector. Groups that displayed relatively low levels of attrition included students from language backgrounds other than English, students from small provincial cities, students whose parents have a university degree or diploma, students with high ENTER scores, and students in fields of education such as health and law. Students working up to 10 hours per week were no more likely to leave the higher education sector than students who were not in paid work (6-9 per cent attrition rate). However, longer hours of paid work were associated with increasing levels of attrition, with students working over 20 hours per week demonstrating the highest attrition rate (17 per cent).

Students' reasons for course change and attrition

The reasons that students give for changing their course suggest that initial interests are important. Students whose initial course was not their first preference were more likely to undergo a course change along with students who described their initial course as being not what they wanted or having never intended to complete their course.

Time in higher education can also result in a clarification of interests, with just over three-quarters of course changers and over one-half of the attrition sub-group indicating that their first course turned out to be not what they wanted, and over 40 per cent of the attrition sub group indicating that wanting to get a job, apprenticeship or traineeship was a consideration in their decision to leave the higher education sector. Students less commonly cited academic difficulties, difficulties juggling work and study, or financial difficulties as their main reason for changing courses or leaving higher education.

Destinations of young people who leave the higher education sector

Having identified which students change or discontinue their university studies, the research then turned to examining the further education or employment pathways taken by members of the attrition sub-group. Leaving the higher education sector before the completion of a qualification did not signify the end of education and training for the one-third of the attrition sub-group who moved to the VET sector.

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Analysis of the destinations of the attrition sub-group showed that most of the group were faring well. The majority were engaged in full-time vocational education, training or labour market activities by the age of 20. Not all were faring as well, however, with just under one-quarter engaged in part time work or study, unemployed or outside of the labour market.

Conclusions

What did we learn from this study? The findings presented in the report suggest that course change or attrition can actually be a positive outcome for some students and should not necessarily be regarded as failure or a waste of talent. Some course change and attrition may be viewed as part of a settling-in period in the transition from school to higher education as students discover where their interests lie. The high proportion of course changers moving to new fields of education and the high proportion of young people who indicated that their first course turned out to be not what they wanted, suggests the need for students to have better access to course and career information prior to entry to tertiary study, or possibly even the need for generalist first year courses.

Course change or attrition can be a positive outcome for some students. Students are more likely to change course or leave university in order to pursue their interests than because of academic or financial difficulties, course change may be protective against attrition, and the majority of those who leave higher education before completing a qualification subsequently enter full-time vocational education, training or employment. However, not all course change and attrition can be viewed in such positive terms. A very small proportion of students experienced a highly uncertain start in the higher education sector, typified by multiple course changes or course change followed by attrition, and just under one-quarter of the attrition sub group were in activities such as part time work/study, unemployment or outside the labour market at the age of 20. Further research is required in order to ascertain the longer-term consequences of attrition from higher education.

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Further information and additional findings are available in the report, [*Course change and attrition from higher education*](#), by Dr Julie McMillan, research report number 39 in the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY). The report was released by ACER on 30 June 2005. Additional information about the LSAY program can be found a [LSAY Website](#).

Print copies of the report can be purchased from ACER Press by phone on (03) 9277 5447 or by email [. \(JavaScript must be enabled to view this email address\)](#) or order online at [ACER Shop](#).

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Educational imperatives for a digital world

It is well over 20 years since the widespread introduction of computers in schools. But rarely does a day pass when there isn't debate about information and communication technology (ICT) access, cost, training and quality. Most schools would say they don't have enough computers, that teachers need more training to use them effectively, and students have more information and communication technology expertise than many teachers.

ACER Research Director of Early Childhood Education Alison Elliott presented a paper *Educational Imperatives for a digital world*, for the Australian School Library Association XIX Biennial Conference in Canberra in April.

The paper looks at

- the mismatch between rhetoric and reality in ICT policy and practice;
- the evolution of a digital generation and how this is changing the cultural and technological landscape, and
- the need to both embrace digital cultures and strengthen thinking, problem-solving and creativity if students are to be users, explorers and creators in a digital world, not merely consumers.

"The school library has rarely had a more critical role in education, but this role is not clearly defined. The library is central to the digital culture of the school, but how do you capitalise on the technology to build powerful learning communities that best meet students' needs and interests within the boundaries of existing school cultures and resources? 'Thinking outside the square' to position yourself strategically, to gain the necessary resources and to get the balance right, plus identify the best ways to support pedagogy and scaffold children's learning is a major challenge for the decade ahead," Dr Elliott said.

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That ICTs have not had the widespread impact on teaching and learning processes envisaged a decade or so ago is disappointing but not surprising. Most educational innovation happens slowly and ICT is in itself continually transformed by new developments. Its applications in education are the subject of considerable debate, informed by a combination of scholarly discourse, opinion and research.

A national assessment of ICT literacy starts later this year. It is being managed by the Australian Council for Educational Research and samples 8000 Year 6 and Year 10 students. A report detailing the ICT literacy of Australian school students will be released in 2006.

Download full conference paper [Educational imperatives for a digital world](#) by Alison Elliott. (Adobe PDF format: 185kb)

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ACER UPDATE

Consultancy on Advanced Standards for Teaching

Members of ACER's Teaching and Leadership research program have been commissioned by the National Institute for Quality Teaching and School Leadership (NIQTSL) to conduct a project to provide advice on current developments in relation to advanced standards for teaching. The study will be used to identify a range of options for the development of a nationally consistent system of advanced standards for the education profession. The final report will aim to assist the Institute in its exploration of the possibility of a national approach to the assessment and certification of highly accomplished practice.

West Australian Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (WALNA)

ACER has secured the latest tender with the Department of Education and Training in Western Australia to develop and trial test items for the West Australian Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (WALNA). WALNA is a curriculum-based assessment administered annually to students in years 3, 5 and 7. It tests students' knowledge and skills in numeracy, reading, spelling and writing. In 2005 ACER will develop test items in reading, spelling and numeracy in close consultation with WA Monitoring Standards in Education personnel. The project will also involve conducting marker training in WA, reporting on the trials, selecting the final WALNA tests and developing Teacher Administration Instructions for each year level. Further information on the WALNA program is available on this website. www.eddept.wa.edu.au/walna/

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Assessing the Value of Additional Years of Schooling for the Non-academically Inclined

A new report based on data from the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) questions whether completing Year 12 is really of benefit to all young people. *Assessing the Value of Additional Years of Schooling for the Non-academically Inclined* (LSAY Research Report No 38) by Alfred Michael Dockery of Curtin University of Technology provides estimates of the benefits to additional years of schooling for young people who seem to be non-academically inclined. The effects of additional years of schooling on earnings and on the probability of being in employment are estimated. The report argues that alternative pathways and institutional arrangements need to be available to meet the varying needs, abilities and preferences of all young people, as well as the information they require to make informed decisions on what is appropriate for them. The full report, which was funded by the Department of Education, Science and Training and released on 30 June 2005, is available for download from the ACER website.

Setting the Pace report

A recent study conducted by the Monash University-ACER Centre for the Economics of Education and Training (CEET) examines the extent to which the substantial reforms introduced in Victoria since 1999 have improved transition opportunities and outcomes for 15-24 year-olds. The report examines a wide range of education, training and labour market indicators for teenagers and young adults. Although focused on Victoria, the analytical framework should prove useful across Australia as governments grapple with how to engage all their young people in meaningful learning and work. The report, *Setting the Pace* by CEET's Michael Long, was prepared for the Dusseldorp Skills Forum (DSF) in association with the Education Foundation and the Business Council of Australia (BCA). It was released on 4 July.

CEET is a joint research centre of the Monash University Faculties of Education and Business & Economics and the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER). The *Setting the Pace* report is available at www.dsf.org.au or www.bca.com.au

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National Awards for Quality Schooling

ACER, along with the Australian College of Educators, is again coordinating the judging in 2005 of the National Awards for Quality Schooling (NAQS). ACER will develop the judging strategy for the awards, the criteria applied to shortlisting candidates and train the panels of judges. One million dollars in prize money will be awarded to Australian schools, teachers and school leaders for outstanding contributions to schooling. The Commonwealth Government initiative recognises and supports schools and teachers committed to sustainable school improvement.

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